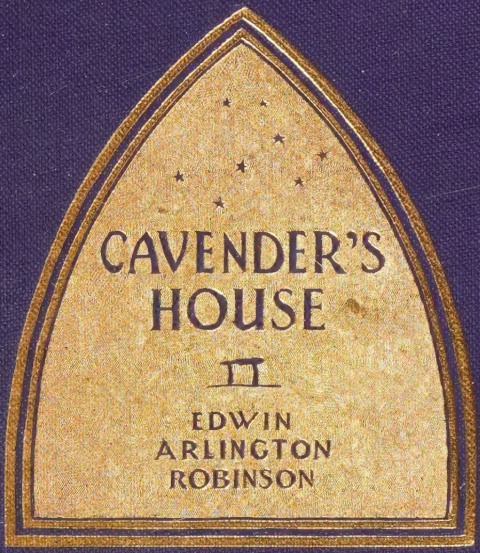
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CAVENDER'S HOUSE

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

COLLECTED POEMS (FIVE VOLUMES)
DIONYSUS IN DOUBT
THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE
THE PORCUPINE
ROMAN BARTHOLOW
SONNETS (1889-1927)
THE THREE TAVERNS
VAN ZORN
TRISTRAM

CAVENDER'S HOUSE

BY

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

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CAVENDER'S HOUSE

CAVENDER'S HOUSE

I

Into that house where no man went, he went
Alone; and in that house where day was night,
Midnight was like a darkness that had fingers.
He felt them holding him as if time's hands
Had found him; and he waited as one waits
Hooded for death, and with no fear to die.
It was not time and dying that frightened him,
Nor was it yet the night that was around him;
It was a darker night, and one within him,
That others not himself were not to know.

He stood by the same door that he had closed
Twelve years ago, and waited; and again
He closed the door, slowly and silently,
And was himself a part of darkness there,
There in his own dark house. Somewhere unseen
There would be chairs and things that he and she
Had sought and felt for, at one time or other,
When darkness was a part of every day
Before there was a light, and was no more.
A touch, and there was light, once on a time;
But now there must be no light in that house
Where no man went, or men, coming to see,
Would find him there; and he must not be there.
Though he must come from half way round the world,
He must not come to be found there tonight.
All by himself he was to find enough,

Attended by no man's discovery
Of him and his employment. Let the moon
Come in a little when he found the room
He sought, and he should see enough to know
The place that had compelled him for so long
To come so far, by the old law that hides
In whatsoever of design there is
In time and triumph.

There was triumph now
All round him where he sat with moonlight lying
Between him and a chair where once had been
A woman who had said less with her tongue
Than with her eyes, which had said nothing to him
That he would know. Triumph was everywhere;
He found the barren house alive with it,

But none of it was his. It was all hers,
The moonlight said, and he sighed hearing it.
He had not come for such a musty draught
Of lees to drink as that. He had come because
The world he wandered was a world too small
Where there was not that house. Some chemistry
Of fate, forestalling him, had long ago
Combined his coming with necessity,
Perhaps, if that would help. It would not help.
Nothing would help save one that was not there.
Nothing could help save one that he had left
Behind him, and had called him back again.

Why had she called him, if she was not there?
The moonlight, slowly giving a dim size
And shape to silence, had no more to show,

It seemed, than he saw now. All through the house
He could hear silence like a multitude
Of silences, and all apprised of him.
There was a silence that was watching him,
And there was one that listened like a spider,
Hearing his thoughts, and holding them to tell
To demons who would likely come for him
When they saw fit to come. They were there now,
Or might be; for a furtive unseen breathing
Was not the breath of man. If it was demons,
They may have called him with a woman's voice,
And this might be their triumph more than hers.
There was a fear in thinking over that,
But one conceived of doubt more than of terror.
He had engaged with all the doubts that were,
And had been thrown by them. He had been choked

By some of them, and sent afoot again
For new encounters. Fear was a breath of night,
When met by strangling doubt of what there was
For certain to be feared. Let him know that,
And let him be a stranger once again
Among the millions, far from the old shadow,
And far from the old house. Let him be told
An answer to that one unanswered question,
And let the frenzied endless elements,
That gave him power to make of honest men
His honorable slaves, take him again
To their mysterious workshop and remould him
To something good or to no thing at all,
And let him then be dead. For he was tired
Of dying; he was tired of being so strong
As to be still alive and as a thing

Contrariously composed of opposites
Too firm to be deceived or reconciled;
And he was not yet told.

At last he rose
And through the moonlit window looked away
Over still trees between him and a cliff
That ended his domain as death ends life.
There was no answer there, but still he looked
As if to find one. He was colder now,
And shivered as he turned again to see
Where moonlight filled a desolated hearth,
So many a time alive with fire that once
Had hummed a comfortable song of home,—
Which was a word that he might find in books,
By looking for it. There were new silences

And darknesses in the old house by now,
Surrounding and attending him, like eyes
He could not see; and there were noises too,
But none that mattered, since he could not hear
The sound of one not there. He sank himself
Again between the pillowy dusty arms
Of his old chair and looked hard at another,
Tonight as unforgiving as defeat
Without a reason. Had she called for him
To tell him nothing? Or what fever was it
That he had followed? Had he come so far
To find an empty chair? If more than that,
What else in heaven's name then was he to find?

Reft of its needless riches, the dead house
Was like a many-chambered cenotaph,

Each room a sepulchre with nothing in it
But stillness and the dark of memory.
There was no need of his exploring them
For surety that their least frequented nook
Would hold him welcomeless. Not even a nail
Would recognize him or be glad to see him.
The piece of moonlit floor between his feet
Would show him all there was, and hold his eyes
Till he saw less; for there were pictures on it,
Like shadows on black water in a well,
Darker than any well. He shut his eyes,
Only to see them nearer. Through his tears
He saw the pictures only multiplied
By sorrow, and remultiplied by doubt.
Let him be told and let him die, he said,
As he had said a thousand times before,

Always unanswered—an old vanity,
And half as rich in salvage as old ashes.
But there were pictures that would not be old,
Trespassing always in the way of peace,
And clearer for closed eyes—when, of a sudden,
They faded, and a sense of unseen light
Not moonlight filled him with a chilly warmth;
And it was long before he dared look up,
For doubt of what was there.

Why was it not
Miraculous and amazing to behold her
Before him in her chair, and in the room
As he remembered it? All the old things
Were there again to see, and he was there;
So it was only right that she was there,

Being part of him. She was the part of him
That he had left behind and wandered from,
And wandering had starved for. She was there
Again as from a past that never was,
And it was not miraculous or amazing.
There were twelve years between them, yet he saw
No record in her face of any change,
Or stealthy work of time or of the world.
As he had seen her when he had believed her,
There she was now to see—fairer to see
Than anything else alive. She was alive,
Or there were surely to be seen or felt
A presence or an evidence of death
For him to recognize. She was not dead,
Or there would not be living in her eyes
The look that never told him anything

But what he told himself. Her pallid face,
Alive with light and darkness, change and shadow,
Was one that would be fair when it was haggard,
And one that would be still without an answer
Unless it answered now. He would not ask
As once he did, when as a man of wrath
He had brought down so heavily on himself
His tower of self that crushed and mangled him,
But leave to her alone, unhazarded,
Her proper native way of indirection,
Which was her only way. It was her time
To ask and answer now, or not to care.
There was an evil and an innocence
That were together nameless in her eyes,
And were a danger that he once had loved
And always had a little feared. Tonight,

If his remorse achieved humility,
They might reveal a reason, or show none
To be revealed, for longer fearing them,
Or fearing not to know. If it was fate
Or nature now that after weary years
He was to wait no more, she must have come
Forgiving him, and he must hold himself
In hope and silence. If he was to learn
Too late for nature, it was not too late
To learn; although it was too late for envy
Of others who had married safer faces,
And were asleep and were not wanderers.
She smiled at him as if interpreting
His faint forgetfulness to call him back;
And for a moment she was like a mother
Bestowing an affectionate reproof

With silence. All she said was in her eyes,
Until she spoke—to startle him somewhat
With a composure more discomfiting
Than patience born of hate. There was no hate
That he discerned in her serenity,
Where it might all have died, for all he knew.
Here was his time to know.

"You come tonight,"
She said at last, "and almost from the end
Of everywhere, to see me. I suppose
I should have asked myself if I was worth
So much." The old low music was all there
In a few words, and years that were behind him
Were there before him for a little while.
He would not ask how long.

"I should have said,"

The voice continued, if it was a voice

That he was hearing, and it must be one,

"When I was young, and saw it without seeing,

That our poor life that we so twist and maim,

And torture almost out of recognition,

Was friendly, and as easy to be tamed

As many another sort of easy creature

To follow at our call. When I was young,

You told me that you had me in your heart

Wherever you went. I may have been there always,

And I dare say it was no difference

When I was there so quiet that you forgot me.

Hearts are dark places. And if they were not,

There might be so much less for us to learn

That we who know so little, and know least

When our complacency is at its best,
Might not learn anything. I have not come
Like a wise spectre to lift any veils,
For you have eyes only to see the way
That you are taking, and not much of that.
You may be favored that you see no more,
Though my authority would be a lie
If it assumed a privilege to say so.
I have not come to fill you with new fears,
Or to make any darker for your feet
The road before you. You would not have that.
I can tell well enough by watching you
That you are anxious more than you are happy
To see me—which is only two and two.
For two and two, when they are less than four,
Are nothing, and are not for long endured

By nature. There was time for you to build
And reckon your account more cautiously,
And with a more considerate contemplation
Of loss by storm or fire or negligence.
You never thought of me so much at home
Before with figures and affairs, I fancy,
But women are compounded of surprises,
And in extremity may surprise themselves
In what they know. I knew, and never told you,
That your account would in the reckoning
Find you a lord of ruins, and no more.
It was all coming, and you let it come.
I was there too, and you should have remembered.
A dog, when he's forgotten, whines and cries,
Or looks and lets you know. Sometimes a woman
Will only smile and ask you to keep warm

When the wind blows. You do not see her face
When you are gone, or guess what's in her mind,
Or covered in her feelings, which are real
Beyond their reputation. It's a pity,
And a great shame, and a malevolent
Extravagance, that you should find that out
So often only when calamity
Comes down upon you like a broken house
To bring the news. Sometimes, again, suspicion
May take the face and shape of certainty,
And so be worse than truth and ruin together.
My penance is that I may say no more
Of life than that you are to learn of it
A best way to endure it to the end.
You are somewhat in danger, I believe,
Of making too much haste. For all I know,

You will not run much nearer to the end
By any such way as that. In Cavender's house,
As in the Lord's house, there are many mansions,
And some that he has not so much as opened,
Having so much to learn."

Cavender stared
At her and her repose, and at her beauty,
Mobile, intangible, inscrutable,
And with a peril in it, or beneath it,
If he must have it there. Was ever a man
So grievously the fool of his possession
As to throw this away, and then himself?
If men before, knowing no more than he,
Had been as he was, why had God made such men
And let them live? If he was patient with her,

Possibly she might say; no man could know
What she might say or do. It was a grief
And a bewilderment to feel her there
So near him, and as far away from him
As when first he had held her in his arms,
A warm enigma that he would not read
Or strive to read. It was enough to have her,
And easy to forget she might not always
Leap when he called, or always dance and sing
For love of him. He should have seen her then
As now he saw her—and as she was then,
If he had known. If he had studied her
And all her changes, he might then have learned
That even in them there was a changelessness,
Performing in its orbit curiously,
But never with any wilful deviation

Out of its wilful course. He might, perhaps,
Have seen there was no evil in her eyes
That was not first in his. Seeing her longer
Before him now, he was not sure that evil
Had ever lived in them. They smiled at him,
Sadly, and waited. They would say no more
Until he answered them.

"When you began,"
He said, and faltered, "I was waiting rather
For more than I supposed there was in words,
Than for so many that I might have drawn
From the unpleasant well of my own thoughts.
It may have been your manner of surprise
That I was unprepared for. For yourself,
I was as ready as I am to die—

Or shall be soon, I hope. You are to say
How that shall be, or if it shall be said.
You have by right of justice now a range
Of many privileges. God knows I know it.
You have God's power tonight, compared with mine,
To lighten me of more than I dare ask—
For I dare ask you nothing. For a while,
Now that you and your words have made me sure
That you are here, where all is as it was,
I would do no more than just look at you,
And let you hear me saying how blind it was
Of me to lose my way, not yet assured
My way was wholly lost—or not to make one
In face of all assurance. For a while,
Having said that, I may be wise to say
No more of that—and I believe you shrink

To hear my name and that of wisdom uttered
By the same voice. Saying too much, or little,
Or saying it wrong to you, might make you go
Away from here for ever. Make me a sign
To say you will not go! Tell me a word
To say so. Laramie! Laramie! Do not go!
For God's sake, do not go. You did not come,
Only to go. Not if you came from hell,
Could you do that. Forgive me! I forgot
That I was there already. I do not dare
To look at you or look away from you.
Laramie! Laramie! Tell me what I am,
And what you are, but do not go away!
Not even if I were mad and you a dream,
Would you do that. And you are not a dream."

Laramie Cavender only closed her eyes,
And sighed like one weary of listening
Before she answered. "No, I am not a dream;
Although I may be dreaming of a time
When all this would have been a task for me
Outside imagination, and an insult
To comprehension. I shall not think of it,
Or more than you compel me to remember.
I was not hurt. You only frightened me,
And gave yourself a scar that will not heal.
My wish would be that you forget it all,
But my will is not yours. The best for you
Is to believe me always when I tell you
That hands harder than yours were helping you
To hurt yourself that night. I have no wish
For you to suffer more than properly,

Or more than your desert. The worst for you
Is not to see yourself with nature's eye,
And therefore know how much you are of nature,
And how much of yourself. I come forbidden
To light the way before you, which is dark
For you and all alive; and it is well
For most it should be so. So much as that,
At least, is yours in common with your kind,
Whose faith, when they are driven to think of it,
Is mostly doubts and fears. Not always—no.
There is a faith that is a part of fate
For some of us—a thing that may be taught
No more than may the color of our eyes.
It was a part of me when I was born,
But not of you; and I am sorry for that.
It would have helped you when you needed most

A shepherd to attend you. But that's over,
And I could wish you might forget. If not,
You may be happier if I leave you now.
You may be nearer to forgetting me
When I am not so near. And who shall say
That you may not survive your memories
To laugh and dance again? For why should not
A man of passion and address dance well
On a crushed life, and laugh? Many have done so,
And more to be will do so."

Cavender shook
With a new wretchedness. "Is there a God?"
He asked. "Is there a Purpose, or a Law?
I thought there was; or I should not have suffered
So cruelly more for you than for myself.

I am not half so much a fugitive,
As one doomed to eternity in time.
You have a right to smile, but there were dreams
Of mine that you might not. You come to me
With all your ways that made a slave of me—
Which is a retribution too remote
From mercy to leave any toy of hope
For me to play with. I was a fool to dream,
Who cannot sleep; and I was more than fool
To fancy there was hope."

"Yes, there is hope,
She said, as if with a prepared reluctance,
"Always, except in those infernal words
Over the gates of hell—which, after all,
Are only man's invention. You may live,

Or die, to find them not so terrifying
In truth as in Italian. So, you see,
With all my ways and my appearances,
I have not come to you without some drops
Of mercy in my vial. I do not say
That you shall suffer always. I don't know."

Yes, there was evil surely in those eyes,
And he could see it shining. Then it faded,
And there was only sorrow there again—
A sorrow that was more a sort of wonder
For what had been. He rose and went to her,
Holding his hands out hungrily before him,
And would have touched her. But another look
At her dismayed him, and he hesitated
Until it was too late. He sighed for that

With trembling gratitude, and from his chair
Was seeing her once more. It was enough
To see her there, if that must be enough.

"You smile," he said, "as if you had averted
With kindness—you will let me call it so—
God knows what desolation. If my hands
Had felt you then to feel you vanishing,
If I had seen your place with you not in it . . .
I must not think, if I must think of that."

He shivered, and a mist was on his forehead,
Cold, as if death had touched him and withdrawn
His touch unwillingly. It was not time
For death, and death was vexed at his mistake,
Was Cavender's unformed thought. Laramie's eyes

Appraised him, but there was no message in them
But a calm shining of ironic sorrow
That only by God's mercy was not hate—
If it was not.

"You may still think of it,"
She told him, "and why not? You are still you,
And Adam was your father. You would touch me,
Which is not any stranger than the stars;
For, though not much, I'm not untouchable—
Or time was when you found me not so dreadful,
And unsubstantial, as to find yourself
Afraid of me. I have no doubt at all
That if you dared, and were sure not to lose me,
You would come here and hold me in your arms
And kiss me, and so cry to be forgiven,

That I might—that I might forget? Well, hardly.
Hardly, perhaps. The queen of all forgetters
Would certainly be taxed and overladen
With excellence that would be noticeable
In heaven if she forgot what I remember.
If you should come to take me, I'm not sure
That in your arms I should find happiness,
Though once I found it there. But who shall tell us
What we shall find, or where? You might recover
In me the solid warmth of a small woman,
And in her kisses you might find the love
That you believe is dead. It should be dead,
By the world's easy measurement of ruin
And its inch-ruling of the infinite,
Yet there might still be left enough of it
To set your penitential wits at work

Till they were faint with wonder. If you knew,
Or if it were my power and will to tell you,
Who knows what answer might astonish you
For asking with your arms? It might be all,
Or it might be the end of all. Who knows?
While I have studied you, and seen you suffer,
I have been saying again how cruel it is
That love should entertain so many chances.
If you had weighed your faith more carefully
With me, when I was with it in your balance,
You might have saved your house, or possibly
You might. I cannot know so much for certain,
Or know how many houses are worth saving.
What if you came to me like Heracles,
Who fetched a lady from a tomb to please
A king? There are no kings for you to please,

And you might have the lady for yourself—
Assuming her to be no puff of nothing,
To vanish, or to laugh."

Now in her eyes
There was a menace and a merriment,
Whether of evil or indifference,
Or both, or neither, he knew not. He rose,
And helpless, with imploring arms again,
He would have seized her. But her eyes met his
With frowning light that warned him, and once more
He stood with his arms empty. In her face,
A mingling of derision and reproach
Might have enhanced the beauty of the damned;
And in the room a stifling of unrest,
Accumulating curiously, was like

A sultry thunder-troubled afternoon,
Dark and surcharged with storm; and he could feel
That cold mist on his forehead, as of death.
"God help me not to touch you," he said, choking;
"I cannot—for I cannot let you go!"

II

Cavender, sure that she was there, could see
The room. It was the same as in years gone,
But for a baffling unreality
Which dimmed and insulated everything
Ineffably with change and accusation.
Nothing would ever be the same again,
For he was not the same; and the whole house
Was like a thing alive only with dying.
A nameless innovation was at work
In walls and corners; and all over it,
In all its darknesses and silences,
He could feel atoms moving and conspiring
Against him, and death rustling in the shadows.
Nothing was on his side; and certainly

Not the still woman who invited him
Indifferently to rapture or despair.
She was herself as he remembered her—
All but that emanation of his doubt,
Enshrouding and surrounding her tonight
With new mysteriousness; she was herself
One moment, and another she was the devil,
Dressed with her face and form, and in the clothes
That liked her best. He had not asked for them,
But they had come with her, coming as if
They had been called; and he remembered them
As if they burned him. She had put them on
To mock him, or he thought so, long ago,
When he was blinded by the sight of them
And of her wearing them as a child might,
Softer than lies, cleaner than innocence,

And asking to be praised. Now she was asking
For more than praise, more than forgiveness, more
Than life. She would not ask to be forgiven
While she had him to see. She would ask rather
To see him lying there dead before her feet.
There would be more of a consistency
In that than in submission; and far more
Of much-offended nature as he knew it
In men and things and time. He should have known
Before, not after; and he got of that
As good a compensation as one has
Of hoarding bottles that have held great wines
Of a lost vintage. She had been wine for him,
And of a power that had usurped his wits,
Once on a time, leaving of him a ruin
That was alive, a memory that could move.

Why should he look to her for less than harm,
Albeit she had brought with her, she told him,
Some drops of hope? He wondered where they were,
And in what vial of wrath she had subdued
Their mildness with her scorn.

To shift his wonder
Another way, she was regarding him
With kindness now, and with a wistful care
That healed him while it cut. "I look about,"
She said, "and things I see are like old stories,
So many of them forgotten. They come back
To me like songs not heard since heaven knows when,
Or like forgotten odors, bringing with them
Pictures of old regrets and pleasures ended,
And of old places that would not be there

If we went there to find them. It is better
Never to go, unless the pain of seeing
No more old things and places as they were
Be pleasure for us—and not always then,
If habit follows. Dead hands holding us
Are dangerous, and may not let go of us
Until we strike them; and if we do that,
They seem to suffer, as maybe they do.
I say this with old sounds and images
Besieging me and telling me of you—
Which is a miracle, if you see it so,—
Before you saw me in a twisted mirror
That you might once have broken, but would not,
Which is another pity; for without it
To plague and change you, all the rest of me
Would have been perfect—or, if not so, quite,

Would have been near enough. You would have found
Your way home in the dark more pleasantly
Than with a light like yours, and would have found
A pleasant lady waiting—which is more
Than all men always find when they go home,
Or wish to find, as many of them would say—
Veraciously enough. But they were never
Of your exacting fancy and sad skill,
Dissolving doubts in their developments,
Regardless of the presence or existence
Of that which you must find. And now I see
More grateful things before me, or behind me,
Than you and your doubts at work together with me
In darkness; and I catch a better music
Than my words now are making for your ears.
Why should we not go back and hear again

Songs you have heard me singing in this room
So many and many a time? I have them still.
Perhaps if I should sing you one of them,
You would forget your doubts, and then be sorry
For what you did to me. For a short time
You might believe me, and then not believe—
Which would be more like waking from a dream
Of joy to misery, than like joy itself;
So maybe it were better not to sing,
Though I will if you ask. But what a child
I must be to consider singing to you,
With your face looking at me! What a way
We women have, having no foresight in us,
Of seeing time only as the minute given
For us to take, as a bird takes a worm,
Or as man takes a woman when his love

Prevails more in his blood than in his heart—
A subterfuge and a discrepancy
Ensured by nature not to be uncommon.
And there's where nature, having a plan for us
Too large for your belief or your evasion,
Has made us as we are, women and men;
But why with such a sad misapprehension
Of our acquaintance with ourselves, I ask
As you are asking, and I cannot tell you—
Except as I am told that we must learn
Of our defeats and doubts, however they hurt.
Love is not vengeance, though it may be death,
Which may be life. You may know more of that,
Presently. But I'm far away from singing
Now, and I must remember what came first
With the old sights and sounds; for you came first—

You and your ways. You and your many ways.
I may have had a few you may have noticed,
But God forgot one, or omitted it,
In my construction. There should have been a way
Provided for a glimpse into your heart,
Where I was to be carried so compactly
And unobtrusively on all your travels,
And in your doings for your daily bread,
With a few luxuries, or perquisites,
Not to be shared with me. My vanity
Misled me to suppose that I should be
Enough, but there was never enough for you.
I should have foreseen that your daily bread
Was mostly to be change, and that your theme
Of being was wholly to be you. No doubt
My pride was in a panic when it first

Conceived how little for you there was of me
That was not either a body or a face;
If so, my panic had some precedents,
Which notably did not help. Why am I saying
All this, when all that's over? Let's go back,
And let me see you as you were at first:
You were a man of many promises,
With deeds enough already to warrant them;
You were a playful and persuasive man,
With power and will beneath your levity
To make a woman curious to be bent
A little, but not broken; you were a man
Who covered yourself with your vitality
So well that only another man might find you—
And he might not; you were a man designed
To change a woman to a desperation,

And to destroy her when your passion felt
A twinge of insecurity. I'll wager
You have not had so many compliments
In twelve years until now. Tell me you have,
And I shall know that you are lying to me;
And I will tell you more than you will hear
Of what you have been having—for I know."

There may have been some healing wistfulness
In her beginning, and some kindness too,
But none that was to last. No permanence
Was ever a part of her, nor was it now;
Not that it mattered now. She might enlarge
His errors, and a former few offences,
Into enormities and still be secure.
Holding a whip that was beyond his reach

And seeing, she could smile and strike him with it
Till he should cower, and with a smarting soul
Pray for her mercy—which was nothing slight
Or small, he knew, to pray for, whether or not
She struck him deeper still. She might not do it.
She might, knowing so much more now than he,
Tell him, or let him see, she found no joy
In smiting him, merely to see him suffer—
Without a word to say. It would be worse
To cringe and flinch and ache, having no word
To say, than it would be to curse and shriek
In protest, having at least a stricken right
Of protestation. Men were not born to meet
So much as this; and though it was their doing,
It was not they who did it. Some such balm
Assuaged him only for another onslaught

Of writhing certainty that he was held
In toils that he had woven for his long
Constriction and imprisonment alone.
If she was there to lacerate him, she
Could only be God's agent in the matter—
And so there must be God; or if not God,
A purpose or a law. Or was the world,
And the strange parasites infesting it,
Serpent or man or limpet, or what not,
Merely a seeming-endless incident
Of doom? If it was so, why was it so?
He could do nothing. He was in a trap.
Nothing was on his side.

"To look at you,"
She murmured, with a slow unfeeling languor,

As well as with a sort of lazy triumph,
"One could imagine that you have at last
Invested fate with an intelligence—
Which is a blow and a beneficence
Together, sometimes. What's to be done for it?
What's to be done for taking on yourself
The purpose, or the law, that puzzles you,
And troubles you, and makes you miserable?
What's to be done for trying to shake down
The stars? If you prevailed, and were successful,
I doubt if you could put them back again;
And that would be embarrassment indeed.
You were a man of many ways and means,
Of many infringements and necessities;
And you could smile away to grief and shipwreck
Those who annoyed you and impeded you

In your more secular performances;
But when you crushed a man and ended him
In your routine, you sighed and wished him well,
And first were sure that he was in the way
Of your more splendid gains and benefits.
You made the world an easier place, or said so,
For the rank and file to live in, or to die in,
As that might be. You should have made yourself
An easier way to walk in; and should first
Have been assured there was no darker way
Ordained for you than by your own self-blindness.
How could you always know that I was lying?
I never told you so. How sure were you
That all the costly flowers you bought for me
Were as intact in their enforced perfection
As I was in my natural innocence?

You should have known. Cavender, you should have
known,
Before your stars came down."

He could say little
To her defeating eyes; he could say less
To her white throat and arms, and her hands folded
So placidly and so conformed for torture
That he would not believe them hers. They waited,
Willing, in all appearance, to wait always,
While she sat watching him; and they were hands
Forbidden to be touched again by his.
They were remembered hands, and were so small
To hold so much. They could hold everything.
They could hold him, and crush him, if they would,
And fling him where they would. They were still hands

To say so much; and they were cruel hands
To be so silent. He would not look at them;
For there was peril in their gentleness,
And warning in their strength. He could say nothing
To them; but he could speak, after a time,
After a fashion, thickly:

"Was it easy
For you to smile at me while you were saying
That we had better not go back? Why not—
If we go far enough? You have no right
To let yourself be listening while I speak,
But since you too have spoken and heard words
Of mine already, and have not disappeared
At sound of them, as I believed you might,
I have a weak and most unhappy wish

To wander back, just for the sake of going,
Over some roads that were to lead to you,
Where they all ended—when I ended them.
I shall not ask you to go over them
With me tonight, for they were not your roads.
They were all waiting before I was born,
Perhaps, for me to take. Perhaps you know,
And will not tell me; or you may not know.
God knows I am not asking you to say.
I'm only wondering if along those roads
There was a devil ahead of me, unseen
And unsuspected; for there may have been one,
Because there must have been. You will see that,
If you will see me now. You will not care,
For that would be incredible—as you were
When first I found you, and as you remained;

As you remained too long. There are some women
Whose privilege is to treasure and conserve
Their mystery, and to make as much of it
As heaven may give them leave and means. But you,
Having so perilous an abundance of it,
Made for yourself a peril of its abuse—
Unconscious of how near you lived with madness
In one who could not know. If I had known,
I should be free, and you would not be here.
There would have been an end, but not the end
That was. I might be now as you are now—
Though I should not be here. If you are here,
And you must be, for God's sake, do not go!
Laramie! Do not go! I am not trying
To shake even what dust weighs from my shoulders.
Let them bear all there is for them to bear,

And lash me if you must. But do not go!
You have not said what you are here to say.
God will not let you go!"

Her folded hands
Remained as ever. Only her lips and eyes
Revealed a furtive and unhurried scorn
That was a promise but was not an answer.
Then she said, smiling, and with eyes half-closed,
"Your talk is rather as that of one forgetting
The size of life. But then, you never knew it,
Except as yours. The world was made for you,
And you were master of as much of it
As had your shadow on it while you stayed
At home. Your travels and advantages
Undid you and the freedom of your soul

And mind and body. You have not stepped since then
With the same enviable indifference
To the unwinking eye that's always watching
The mighty when they're tripped. I can remember
When there was not a way of mortal walking
So firm, and so erect and independent,
And so distinct in its authority,
As yours. But there was wickedness and waste
In your abused abundance (as you say
There was in mine, while saying you don't know)—
Which is so lamentably why it is
That you are here. I shall not go away,
So long as you are gracious and respectful,
Until you tell me, after good reflection,
Whether you wish to go with me, or stay.
I shall not have your life. I do not want it.

There is a purpose, or a law, you say,
That worries you. Well, one of them may use it,
For something. I doubt if God remembers it.
There have been so many since then."

Her eyes were open,
Having in them a light that held no love;
And that which on her lips had been a smile
Became a slow short laughter. He could feel
Once more a moisture coming on his forehead,
And he was trembling in a cold dismay
Of unbelief. Whose words had he been hearing?
Was Laramie saying them? She must have said them,
For there she was; and she was smiling still,
Sleepily, once he would have called it, smiling
Himself, and valuing her with tenderness,

Because she was so beautiful to look at,
And comforting to touch. Now, if he touched her,
She might be nothing. He must not forget
That she had warned him, and he must remember
His place among men who have not a place;
And after that, if there was profit in it,
He might assay the dross of his deserving
To find there more than scorn or less than hate.
What should he try to find where all was dust?
If she had brought with her those drops of hope,
They were concealed with her identity;
And she had not yet promised he should have them.

He started at the sound of her low voice,
So low and soothing that he might have wept
Hearing it; and he saw now in her face

The coming of another gentleness,
A chiding, and a sorrow. "I am sorry,"
She said, "if I was bitter with you just then,
But your words before mine were not assuring:
There would have been an end, if you had known,
You said, but not that end. Why do you fly
So far away from me on the dark wings
Of your uncertainty? Why do you say the end?
If you had known, there might have been no end;
And you and I together might still be here,
Happy as children, with age watching us
From out of corners, but not touching us.
Oh no, not yet. We might be like two squirrels
Having a home in a large hollow tree,
More to be judged than those who had no tree
Like ours, and had not our exclusive store

Of nuts and acorns—which are necessary,
No matter how much the squirrels love each other,
Or with what constancy. Why should it be,
With all the rest unfailing and abundant,
That loyalty should cultivate so little
Concern to save itself? Why are we made
So restless, and insatiable in change,
That we must have a food that is not ours?
And having poured the vinegar of suspicion
On food that once we found so appetizing,
Why in the name of heaven are we amazed
To find it not so sweet? And having soiled
Ourselves illustriously enough to serve
As migratory landmarks for the town,
Why must we look so viciously for spots
Where we must find them, even if we must make
them?

The spots you found on me would have surprised
A leopard."

Was she never to be herself,
He wondered; and he watched her watching him,
As one amused and weary of seeing him,
And unmoved by his wonder. Half she said
Had more the tenor of recrimination
Born of his long remorse and self-defeat
Than of her native way; and half she said
Was like her when he had adored and prized her
As an unmatched possession, which was all
There was in reason for a man to do;
And he was reasonable. Idolatry
Was never more so—never until there came
An evening when his idol swayed and mocked him,

As if to seize him and to strangle him.
He could not see what happened after that,
Or say what happened. He could only know
When the world stopped, and all the stars were dark,
And when the moon, the same moon that had seen
A steaming world before there was a man,
Gave no more light, although it was still shining.
And it was shining now—even as the eyes
Of Laramie were shining, without light
To guide him, or to show him where he was,
Or what was coming. If she did not know,
She might be merciful, and without mercy
Say that he was to suffer and to die
At fate's appointed pleasure. If she had come
Only for that, why had she come at all?
Why had she come so far without a reason?

It was a part of her to have no reasons,
And perhaps that was one.

"You should have known.
Cavender, you should have known." Like drops of lead
Those words had burned a way into his heart,
Where they still burned. What manner of wife was this
To endure him in his guilt and ignominy,
And laugh while she endured? It was her way
Sometimes, and long ago, to laugh at him
When he was wise and solemn, but that was over—
Longer ago than ageless men remember.
He had been dead and damned again to living
Since then, and that was why he was alive.
One memory was between him and all time
Before it. All his time now was eternal,

And she was watching him as if she knew it.
"Cavender, why go back and try so hard
To bury yourself behind your memories?"
She frowned, he thought; and in her voice he felt
A pitying triumph that was worse than hate.
"You cannot hide yourself. There is for you
Only one memory left; and I can see you
Through it as clearly as through mountain air.
There's nothing in this going back of yours
But a sick hope to find some reason there,
Stronger than you, for what you did to me.
Some overwhelming heritage may have done it,
You hope; and so it may. I hope so, too.
Unhappily, you must die to find that out,
If ever you are to know. How shall I say
What you, who knew so little while you believed

Yourself a king of life, may learn of death?
You may learn all, or nothing. Why look to me
For wisdom that is not for man or woman?
Do you not see me as a woman still?
I should have said so. Cavender, Cavender, think
No more of going back, there's nothing there.
Twelve years ago it was all swept away,
And there your time begins—where your life ended.
The rest of it is only a long dying.
If you revealed yourself and told the law
Your story, you would not have so long a death,
And you might gain somewhat. The laws of men,
Along with older laws and purposes,
Might serve you well. Why not? Remorse and pain
May be the curse of our accomplishment
On earth, and may be our career, sometimes.

It may be, and it is. If there's a justice,
I have not found it yet, though I have hope;
And I have brought some drops of it for you.
I mentioned them."

"Good God in heaven!" he cried.
His wisdom and expediency forgotten,
He was a mendicant imploring her
To cease, and let him know. "Tell me the truth,"
He begged, "and you may let the dogs of hell
Follow and eat me. I shall not care then.
Tell me that I was mad for doubting you,
Or that a poison that was burning in me
Was truth on fire, as I believed it was.
I am not asking now to be forgiven,
Or dreaming of it. Laramie! Let me know,

And leave me then to die. I can do that.
Living and dying will be no more then
Than clouds on water. I have had death enough
To care no more for dying than for sleeping—
If I could sleep. I shall not sleep again
Until I know. And even if I be told,
I shall not walk again with men and women.
My God, that I should come to this—to this!
Laramie, give me the last drop of hope
That you will tell me, and then you may kill me.
Laramie, let me know!"

"Living and dying,"
She said, with hardness gleaming in her eyes,—
"Your living and my dying, for example,
Are nothing to your knowing whether or not

My freedom was a sin. Why do you ask,
I wonder." Her mouth was harder than her eyes
Now, and there was no pity for him in either,
While for a time of silence she sat there,
With her hands folded, always watching him.
"Why do you ask for what I cannot tell?"
She said; and seeing his face incredulous
With pain, and tortured with abject amazement,
She asked again, as anyone might, surprised,
"How shall I tell you, when I do not know?"

III

Cavender looked away from her cold eyes
To watch her hands again, folded and still,
As if at peace with time, and out of it.
He wondered how two hands could be so still,
And for so long; and a thought frightened him
Of all those hands had power in them to do
And to destroy. He would not look at them.
They were too small to be so terrible.
They were not hands.

"You have the privilege,"
He said, with a dry tongue, "of your conceits,
And of your last obscurities. You have
A right to blind me with your mysteries,

And one to see me groping, as I am now,
Among them. You have only to say No,
To make of any question left in me
A prisoner to burn always in a fire
Of silence; you have only to say Yes,
To give it freedom so that I may ask
Once more of you that you will let me know.
Let your invention change my words to gold,
And you will see at last how poor I am;
I shall be destitute, having no words
That you need hear. Laramie, I have nothing.
No, I have nothing left in all this world
But one unanswered question following me
And leaping on me like a monster laughing—
A beast that will not die until I die,
If it will then. You know, and you may tell me,

Whether a madness tortures me tonight
With hope, or whether reason lives in it.
Even you may say as much as Yes or No
To that. Tell me if there be reason in it,
Or if it be so wrong and so outrageous
As only to be madness and an insult
To you and heaven, if you have come from heaven.
You do not tell me from where you have come;
You tell me nothing. But see how poor I am,
And see how little of me there is to kill!
Laramie, let me know—and let me die!"

He knew there was a woman with two hands
Watching him, but he saw no more of her
Than would assure him she was there. He feared
To see her face, and he feared not to see it;

And then he found it as it was before,
Languid and unrevealing. Her eyes closed,
And her lips moved as if repeating words
That had no meaning. Then, with eyes half open,
She said again, "Why do you ask, I wonder?
Moreover, there's a backward valuation
Of my commodity in all this anguish.
Have you not heard yet, anywhere, death-bells ringing
For Love and poor Romance? Biologists
And bolshevists are ringing them like mad—
So loud that Love, we're told, will soon be lost
With dodos, dinosaurs, and pterodactyls.
Has never a thought of this disheartened you
In your pursuit of pain? Has there not yet
Been sorrow enough for you in my destruction
To make you sorry for so many questions—

All to one end, and that one end yourself?
If I had sinned, and I should tell you so,
Would your account with me be cancelled then,
Balanced, and satisfactory? Your ledger
Was always in a tangle, Cavender;
But was it left like that? If it were mine,
And I were you, I'd enter myself as loss—
Profit and loss, and done with it. But no,
There's haste in that, and a forgetfulness.
If I was false, you set a price on folly—
For you to pay—that was outside the scope
Of your possessions or your expectations.
You are still paying, and for some time yet
You may still pay; and I am sorry for that."
There was no sorrow in the gleaming look
She gave him, no regret for what she said;

And after a forlorn effect of hope,
His answer was of one awaiting neither:
"You may say what you will. I took my doom
With ignorance for courage, fearing nothing
And knowing nothing. I was not there myself,
But one that had the name and face and body
Of me was there; and I am paying for him.
Laramie! Will you try to tell me now
If I had reason to be mad that night?"

"And why should I do that for you," she said,
"When all you want is to go round and round
Yourself, and to be saying endlessly,
'Laramie, let me know!'? It does no good
To comfort you with knowledge of new orders,
Or to assure you that you make too much

Of not so much; for you are not assured
Or comforted. You are old-fashioned there;
And were it not for what you did to me,
Your misery might be thought ridiculous
By sages who might laugh. Knowledge is cruel;
And love, they say, is cruel as the grave.
It's an old saying. All that's wrong with it
Is, that the grave may not be always cruel.
You will know more of that. There is a plan
Within me that's awaiting your acquaintance
And presently will be urging your approval.
It's an old-fashioned plan, older than you
And all your admirable ancestors—
Who may, unwittingly, have had to do
With our catastrophe. There are those laws
And purposes of yours, always at work,

And doing the Lord knows what with our intentions.
Eternity may have time and room to show us
How so transformed a fabric may be woven
Of crimes, corruptions, and futilities,
That we shall be confounded with a wonder
At our not seeing it here. Yes, there is hope;
And there is hope deferred by too much haste—
Or so there might be. It's all rather dark.
My plan may have a sort of nearness in it,
More in the measure of your speculation."

"What woman is this," he pondered, sick at heart,
"Who has the form and face of Laramie,
Her voice, her languors, and her levities,
Her trick of words—and half of them not hers?
Where has she been to find so many of mine

That have done service and have nourished me
Like a fantastic food, proving itself
Not to be food, but shadows? Shall our deeds,
And even our thoughts, be scrutinized hereafter
By any and all who have no more release
From follies here than to live still with ours?
If memories of so galled and sorry a life
As this must follow us when we go from here,
We are all damned indeed."

"I have not told
You yet, for certain, Cavender, that they will."
She laughed at him with her eyes, silently,
To see him stare at her. "I may have come,
Perhaps, by some celestial dispensation
To bring those drops of hope, if you require them.

My levity has outlined a sketch of you
Not wanting them, but we may rub that out
With no disaster and no difficulty.
You may still wish to savor them, and to feel
Replenished, as you may, with resolution
When you have swallowed them, and fortified
Beyond retreat. Some, having taken them,
Have turned their suffering faces to the sunrise
And waited for the light, careless of all
Unanswered questions that have haunted them,
And laughing monsters that have followed them,
And leapt upon them from behind and bit them,
And licked them with hot tongues. Others have not,
Preferring a blank hazard of escape,
With no especial surety of release
Thereafter for themselves. We'll go outside

Before long, Cavender; we'll go out together,
And in the moonlight see how it all looks.
I have a notion it would interest us,
And fill us both with memories and ideas,
If we should walk down, as we used to do,
To the old place. The cliff will still be there,
And the old seat, if years have not removed it.
We have had many happy hours down there.
And some of them with moonlight shining on us
Then, as it shines tonight, in the same way—
In the same chilly silver silent way
It had when we were there. But I was foolish
Then, for I let my love make me believe
Too much. I believed almost anything then.
You made me, and you let me. I was happy.
Then you would hold me close to keep me warm,

And I would watch clouds going over the moon,
Like doubts over a face—if I had known
Enough to think. I was not trying to think.
You said I was too beautiful to think,
And said that if I did, your quality
Might have a shrinkage. You were a playful man,
Cavender; and you played with me sometimes
As a child might, seeing it in the house,
With a superior kitten. It was careless
Of me that I was not much given to thought
While I believed in you and in your love,
Which was a sort of love—the sort that owns
And gloats, and prowls away complacently
For capture and a change. I had supposed
That I was bright and lively and adequate,
And even a match for your discrimination,

But I was not. I should have done more thinking.
I should have taught myself more amiable
And animal ways to make me surer still
That I should never be sure. But for the few
Who know, and in their hearts cannot but know
Security and content, women had best
Believe, or best believe they do not care—
Which is no harder than to know that wine
Is sweet when it is sour. If I transgressed
In desperation or in vindictiveness
At last, as fear inflamed you to believe,
I wonder when it was your avocations
Had first recess and leisure to find out,
And then to be disturbed. Poor Cavender!
The man who makes a chaos of himself
Should have the benefit of his independence

In his defection. He should wreck himself
Alone in his own ship, and not be drowned,
Or cast ashore to die, for scuttling others.
I have been asking, Cavender, since that night,
Where so malicious and inconsiderate
A devil could hide in you for so long time.
There may be places in us all where things
Live that would make us run if we should see them.
If only we could run away from them!
But, Cavender, we can't; and that's a pity.
I'm tired of sitting here and seeing you there,
As if you wished to die. Come down with me
To the old place, if there's a pathway left.
I want to see you when you see it. Come!"
With languid grace that he remembered well,
She rose and beckoned him

He followed her

As if on wheels, drawn irresistibly

And slowly, from the room where he had found her.

Through the dim hall, no longer dark, and filled

With its old furniture and ornaments,

He followed her.

"Open the door for me,"

She said, and smiled. Cavender opened it,

And followed her along a darkened way

Of weed-grown gravel, with encroaching boughs

Whipping him as he went, to the cliff's edge,

Barred with a fencing of long-rusted iron,

Which might not be secure. He stared at it,

And shivered in the moonlight as he stared,

As at a thing alive whose touch was death.

"Here is the place," she said; "and to be sure,

Here's the old seat again. I should have known it
At once and anywhere. Cavender, sit beside me,
But do not touch me. There's a distance yet
Between us; and you may as well respect it,
If only for form's sake. Form is important,
And has revenges, even as time will have them—
Though you forgot that, once. Yes, you forgot
Your manners, Cavender; and you are not one
To desecrate your code without remorse.
We must be born inferior and unfit,
If we shall so offend the Holy Ghost
As you did, and be well again thereafter.
You have not been very well since you looked down
Over this cliff that night. There must have been
Shadows down there that even a moon like this
Could not have made. They may have frightened you,

A little, I think. They may have made you shiver.
You may have shivered more than you are shivering
Now, for all I shall know. You were brave enough
In seizing your requirements, I dare say,
And in your game of living, as you played it—
Until that night. Men would have called you so,
Having no call for thought; and so you were.
Had a man injured or insulted you
Beyond all compromise or apology,
You would have knocked him down, the chances are,
Briskly and willingly, and without sorrow.
Granting you that, meanwhile, or more than that,
I shall believe you shivered and were sorry
When you looked down over this cliff that night.
It must have looked a long way down from here,
Cavender; and there must have been a darkness

Down there that even the best of moons could never
Have made for you like moonlight anywhere else.
I shall not ask you to look down there now,
For that would hurt you, and would not help me.
Besides, that iron is old. If you should choose
To trust it, and to lean so hard upon it
As to go down with it and learn what's there,
I should be powerless, I suppose, to hold you;
But let us wait. At least, there is no hurry.
You've not a notion of how much time there is,
Nor even if there be any such thing as time,
Save as you make it by the sun and stars;
And you may know so much more of all that,
One of these days, that you will almost laugh.
Tell me if you were not a little frightened
At what you saw down there, if you could see it,

Among so many shadows; and then tell me
If you had no remorse for what was there,
So surely there, whatever you may have seen.
It may be worse to know that a thing's there,
Not seeing it, than to see. Men have been scared
As much in that way as in any other;
And I should hate it worse than seeing demons.
I'd rather see a demon, Cavender,
Than a dead woman after I had killed her;
And I would rather see her dead before me
Than know she was down there, not seeing her.
You must have had a melancholy night,
Waiting for news of me. None of your friends,
Or mine, could tell you where I was that night,
For none could say till early workmen found me.
The town's had never so rich a mystery

Before or since to engage its hungry tongue.
It was a cream for cats; and all the time
They wondered why the woman they most envied
Should do it. It was peculiar, Cavender;
And you could answer nothing. You were broken,
And it was no more than in tune with nature
That you should bury me and then go away.
But why could you not so much as hesitate
That night, before you seized me and then threw me
Down on those rocks, a hundred feet below us?
I was not hurt; you only frightened me.
But still you should have waited and been sure,
And had at least the balm of certainty
To wash your scar. No, it would not have healed you;
Although it might have cooled you, in a measure,
And that would have been better than to ask,

And ask, and always ask, unanswered questions—
Impossible questions, and as dark to me
Tonight as they would be to the first child
That you may see tomorrow. There's a word now,
Cavender! Have you thought of it, sometimes?
For some of us who know that we shall die
Before another dawn for doing too much
In too great haste, Tomorrow may be, I fancy,
A fearful word. Are you afraid of it,
Cavender? I was not hurt, if you remember.
It will not hurt you if you throw yourself
Down there as you threw me, but it will scare you
Abominably. I'm sure you will not like it.
But as for that, there's nothing for you to like
In this life any more. You may go down
Where I went, and you may find comfort there;

Or you may cling to my few drops of hope
For more from your endurance. For such haste
As yours a certain slowness is exacted,
Or an uncertain plunge to find an end.
You may not find it, or you may. Who knows?
Cavender, you are locked in a dark house,
Where you must live, or wreck your house to die;
And I am sorry for that. No, do not touch me!
I am not here to feel those hands of yours
On me again. For God's sake, Cavender,
Try to forget your questions, and be decent.
If other arms than yours have had me in them,
What does it matter now? You may be dying
Tonight, for all you know. God knows it's time,
Unless he knows that you must go on living.
What do you say to that?"

There was a change
In the voice now that pierced and sickened him,
Like a sword going slowly into him.
It was not Laramie now that he was hearing,
Yet there she was, and she was Laramie;
Laramie in the moonlight. He could see her;
And he had never seen her quite so cold
And free of him before. He would have touched her
With all the tenderness and penitence
Imaginable, but she had thrust him off
With scorn stronger than hands, if not with hate.
Perhaps she did not even so much as hate him,
He thought; and such a thing as that was likely,
Considering what she was—if he could know.
He dared not look away from her cold face,
Fearing on finding her again to see her

Before him in another man's arms and laughing—
Laughing as Laramie would never have laughed,
Although she may have lied to him that night.
She must have lied; and he must learn of her
Whether she lied or not. He had paid for truth
By now, and Laramie would be kind to him
Tonight, and let him know. Let the rest come
For what it was to be. Let the end come;
And let the scales of retribution, heavy
With him and his offence, break with its weight
And hurl him into whatsoever pit
Should be prepared for him.

"I have no right
To touch you, Laramie; I shall not forget,"
He said. "It was the past in me, forgetting

How far away it was. I shall not ask
Forgetfulness of you, God knows. Although
You might afford it freely as the moon
Spares light, I shall not ask you for it now.
No, I shall only ask you for an answer
To one unanswered question. Tell me that—
Tell me if I was mad for doubting you,
Or if the fire in me was truth on fire—
And I will do as you say will be best;
Or I will do as you require of me,
Be it the best or worst. I'll throw myself
Down there to death—or, if you say to do it,
I will live on alone in my dark house,
With all its doors that I have never opened.
There may be something left for me to find
That you have hidden there. You were like that,

And you were always so—until that night.
Laramie! For the love of God, be kind
Once more, and let me know, and let me die!
Laramie, let me know!"

Laramie rose
Like fate, and stood before him like fate laughing;
And it was in fate's voice, or in a voice
That never in life could have been Laramie's,
That she was speaking now: "How many times,
Cavender, will it soothe or comfort you
To ask of me what I may never tell you?
There is in me no answer to your question;
There is in me only as much of me
As you have brought with you and made of me.
How shall I tell you what you do not know,

Knowing no more myself ? Laramie's eyes,
If they are seeing you now, wherever they are,
Have pity in them, I hope. I do not see them—
Wherever they are—and so I cannot tell you.
I hope there may be pity in them for you,
And love. There is a love stronger than death,
Time says; and Laramie's love may have a life
Stronger than death. I should not be surprised.
It would be like her. You have had me saying
Her language to you out of time and tune,
And out of order most incongruously;
You have had life and death together so long
To play for you their most unholy music,
That you have not an ear left for another;
You are a living dissonance yourself,
And you have made of grief and desperation

Something of Laramie that had her voice.
There's yet another voice for you to hear
Before I leave with you those drops of hope—
Which are still real, if you believe in them—
Or you renounce them, and take on yourself
Your own destruction, to be rid of hope,
Real but uncertain. You may choose again
A sudden end, only to find no end.
So men have done before you, and so men
Will do. So men, sometimes, are made to do.
So men are made imperiously to act
For God, with only mortal apprehension,
And wish the act a dream. So men will do,
And do again, because a laughing monster
Has bitten them, and stung them with a doubt
That frets and bores like an undying worm

Through a disordered curiosity,
Like yours, and will not cease even while they blot
With death a furtive or an injured answer.
How are you to be certain, from now on,
That injury done to her was not itself
An answer, and evasion her revenge?
You do not know; you may be never to know.
She may have turned at last, and given your pride
A few incisions of experience,
To caution you that observation still
Attended her disgust and her endurance.
How do you know the stone you cast that night
Was not your fear, hammered to look like love
By passion and sick pride? Love would have been
The death of you far likelier than of her,
If there was to be death. Love, would you call it?

You jealous hound, you murderer, you poor fool!
You are listening to yourself now, Cavender;
And Laramie, let us hope, is where no sound
Of this will find her. She has had enough
Of you, and she has earned her silences,
Or what may be for her. If you are sure
Your silences are waiting for you there—
Down there, where she was—Cavender, why not
Go after them? She was not hurt, she said;
You only frightened her. Are you afraid,
Cavender, to go down where she was once?
Or is it another doubt that holds you here?
Well, there's a long time yet for you to think,
But there's not any, and there may not be any,
I fear, for your not thinking. I am sorry
For being so harsh, but you would have it so.

You have what you have made, which is not good;
And I am sorry for that."

A famished hope
Enforced him to look hard into her face,
Only to find it fearsome and severe,
And growing slowly into something else.
A clutch of horror seized him, and his head
Sank helplessly into his trembling hands;
And there was a dark silence everywhere
Until a voice that was not Laramie's
Began again inexorably to speak:
"Cavender, there is nothing for you now
But what your laws and purposes ordain;
For it appears that you believe in them.
If you did not, you would not stay alive,

Being what you are. You are not afraid to follow
Where she went once. You are afraid to live;
And where there is no fear, there's no more courage
Than faggots have in fire. You are afraid
Of time and life, and you are afraid of me;
But you are not afraid of dying, so long
As you shall have a mortal right to die.
Cavender, you are no such fool as that.
There are still doors in your house that are locked;
And there is only you to open them,
For what they may reveal. There may be still
Some riches hidden there, and even for you,
Who spurned your treasure as an angry king
Might throw his crown away, and in his madness
Not know what he had done till all was done.
But who are we to say when all is done?

Was ever an insect flying between two flowers
Told less than we are told of what we are?
Cavender, there may still be hidden for you
A meaning in your house why you are here."

The terror that he felt, hearing those words,
Was more for hearing them as they were spoken,
And seeing, in fancy, who was saying them,
Than for their truth. It was intolerable
To know their warning told in his own voice,
But he must shrink, and hear them. It was foul
And perilous to be greeted by one's face,
But he must look. He looked, and there was nothing.

Into that house where no man went, no man
Would go again that night. The same white moon,

That saw the world before there was a man,
Would light an empty room until, in time,
There would be only darkness and a silence
Where man had been who had best not have been,
So far as he could know. If Laramie knew,
She was too far away even to care,
Perhaps, or to remember. He was alone,
And he was best alone. No man or woman
Would more than pity him, though a few might see,
As he believed that he might hope to see,
More than his eyes could hold while he was there,
Remembering what was done there. If he did it,
There was no more for him to do or say
Than willingly to slough a tattered mask,
And say what thing it was; and if hands stronger
Than his were more involved and occupied

Than his had been, there was no more to do
Or say than to cast out the lie within him,
And tell men what he was. He could do that.
He could do anything now but go again
Into that house of his where no man went,
And where he did not live. He was alone
Now, in a darker house than any light
Might enter while he lived. Yet there was light;
There where his hope had come with him so far
To find an answer, there was light enough
To make him see that he was there again
Where men should find him, and the laws of men,
Along with older laws and purposes,
Combine to smite. He was not sorry for that,
And he was not afraid. He was afraid
Only of peace. He had not asked for that;

He had not earned or contemplated it;
And this could not be peace that frightened him
With wonder, coming like a stranger, slowly,
Without a shape or name, and unannounced—
As if a door behind him in the dark,
And once not there, had opened silently,
Or as if Laramie had answered him.

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Robinson, Edwin Arlington

Cavender's house.

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